



Using Restorative Practices to Build Stronger and More Inclusive Communities

Authors



KALEIGH A. MROWKA

Associate Director,
Collaborative Center
for Restorative Practices
in Higher Education
International Institute
for Restorative Practices
kmrowka@iirp.edu



RAVI BHATT

Associate Director
Hardee Center for
Leadership and Ethics
in Higher Education
Florida State University
rbhatt2@fsu.edu



RAFAEL RODRIGUEZ

Associate Vice President &
Dean of Students
Division of Student Affairs
New York University
rar9900@nyu.edu



JEFF P. GODOWSKI

Assistant Dean
Flora Rose House
Cornell University
jpg278@cornell.edu



ERIN BAKER-MENO

Graduate Student,
Clinical Mental Health
Residential Life
University of Vermont
erin.baker@uvm.edu



KELLI PERKINS

Dean of Student Life
and Culture
The Madeira School
perkins.k@northeastern.edu

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES CAN SERVE AS A PROACTIVE APPROACH

to address behavior in a way that not only repairs harm and restores relationships, but also creates stronger communities. Using a circle-style conversation to elicit our perceptions of the potential of these practices to support and advance liberatory principles, we sought to uncover the experiences of four diverse scholar-practitioners who have worked to integrate restorative practices into their work in college and university residential environments. The personal narratives revealed that a more liberatory implementation of restorative practices can be accomplished when it is executed in accordance with its core principles and used to build and maintain community, rather than simply responding to harm. Because this approach centers historically marginalized and student voices, it can be used as a framework to actively seek to dismantle larger systems of oppression.

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Restorative justice (RJ) is an approach to managing harm that is rooted in a community-focused philosophy of interconnectedness, human dignity, and social responsibility (Breton & Lehman, 2001; Fronius et al., 2016). As the term implies, restorative justice focuses on repairing the harm done to individuals, relationships, and communities. Often considered to be in alignment with Indigenous justice paradigms, RJ is defined by a wider underlying philosophy of reciprocity, relationality, and community responsibility that counters dominant Western approaches (Davis, 2019; Zehr, 2005). The term restorative practices (RP) has been used to encompass both the proactive and responsive elements of this framework. While restorative justice revolves primarily around addressing harm and repairing relationships, restorative practices extend to promoting the importance of community development, community responsibility, and community relationships. As higher education institutions face internal and societal challenges, RP considers a more collective and co-creative form of community building and education among residential teams and communities.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Restorative justice, which was first integrated into college and university environments almost exclusively through the lens of a responsive student conduct model (Allena & Karp, 2004; Kara & MacAlister, 2010; Rinker & Jonason, 2014), prioritizes understanding the impact of one's actions on the community. Whenever feasible, this form of justice brings together the wrongdoers and those affected to facilitate a deeper understanding of the harm caused. This approach humanizes all parties involved, unlike a sole focus on punishment, which often does little to support behavioral change.

More recently, restorative practices have been used as a proactive framework within residential life programs (Whitworth, 2016). Early research on integrating restorative practices into college and university residential environments suggests that they may contribute to creating stronger communities and can serve as a powerful tool for learning about civic commitment (Allena & Karp, 2004; Hiraldo, 2019). In residential life, the use of restorative practices can consist of proactive community building in a myriad of ways: managing residential student conduct and conflict, responding to local and global issues, providing opportunities for staff supervision and leadership training, and formulating residential curricula or community-building models (Allena & Karp, 2004; Howard, 2022; Whitworth, 2016). This approach provides staff and other members of a residential community a platform to discuss various timely and relevant topics. For instance, a welcome circle for first-year students or a new cohort of professional staff can focus on sharing both their excitement and concerns about new experiences. These structured circle conversations play a pivotal role in building trust, thereby fostering a heightened sense of safety. This, in turn, paves the way for more candid discussions and greater opportunities for forging stronger connections. Restorative practices can also serve as a responsive tool, empowering community members to contribute to troubleshooting or problem-solving issues such as filling gaps in an on-call duty rotation or helping to address concerning behavior or incidents impacting communities or teams such as vandalism on a floor or conflicts among staff.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND LIBERATION

At its core, a restorative philosophy can counter neoliberal, colonial, and White supremacist ideas of community by envisioning a more relational, co-constructed, and just community. If implemented in a liberatory way, the tenets of restorative justice call for the identification and acknowledgment of harms, as well as the determination of what can be done to repair the harms inflicted on people of color, Indigenous people, and other oppressed identities (Davis, 2019; Valandra, Wap̓háha Hokšíla, 2020). A liberatory version of restorative practices seeks to challenge power dynamics, center the voices of marginalized communities, promote community building and collective action, value and promote inclusivity and cultural diversity, prioritize healing, empower marginalized communities, and embrace flexibility and adaptivity.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

The conversation that follows reflects the structure of a restorative circle. This format provides an opportunity to reflect on the applicability of these kinds of discussions to creating spaces for liberatory dialogue. In this study, four professionals (referred to as co-authors) who have used restorative practices at different positional levels in residence life participated in a 90-minute virtual circle via Zoom. They were asked questions exploring how restorative practices have shaped their perception of residential communities, community building, and organizational culture in residence life

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departments within the context of liberatory practices. They also offered their perceptions of how restorative practices invite (or do not invite) practitioners to re-imagine what community, co-creation, power dynamics, equity, and community responsibility can look like. The virtual circle was recorded, transcribed, and then collaboratively edited into a transcript shared below. The use of a Zoom circle allowed for a generative co-creation of the discussion.

Conversation circles are a core component of restorative practices as they encourage communities to build upon collective stories and allow voices and negotiations for collective meaning to emerge (Pranis et al., 2003). Within the circle format, co-authors were able to refer to the contributions of others, build their responses on the reflections already presented by their peers, and actively reconsider their answers and responses. In this way, takeaways from the circle were not just collections of individual stories but rather co-created interpretations of how restorative practices might have liberatory potential within residential life spaces. This unique methodology aims to model restorative practices as a potential liberatory way of integrating multiple perspectives into the learning narrative.

POSITIONALITY OF CO-AUTHORS

Our co-authors' exposure to restorative practices ranges from experiencing these practices as a student leader to developing and implementing restorative approaches at the organizational level. The co-authors represent a breadth of professional and life experiences that allowed for a nuanced and deep examination of the potential of restorative practices to contribute to the goals of liberation within higher education.

Erin Baker-Meno (she/her/hers) is a multiracial queer femme scholar with more than two decades of experience in higher education spanning several functional areas; she is currently pursuing her second master's degree while centering family and community joy and healing. **Ravi Bhatt** (he/him/his) is a Desi-American higher education doctoral student who has served in several student roles in student affairs and has a passion for social justice and representation within literature. **Jeff Godowski** (they/them/theirs) is a White, queer scholar-practitioner and senior residential education professional researching the student meaning-making experiences of interpersonal conflict. **Kelli Perkins** (she/her/hers) is a Black woman scholar, currently a senior administrator at an all-girls boarding school, with more than 15 years of experience in student affairs.

CIRCLE CONVERSATION

The conversation below is an excerpt from a transcript of the dialogue among the co-authors, which has been edited by the co-authors themselves. The questions, developed in advance of the conversation, were framed by the facilitators. While not included in this excerpt, initial questions included an opportunity for the co-authors to connect, learn about each other, and build relationships before beginning the conversation on community and liberation.

Facilitator: Now that we have gotten to know each other a bit, I'm curious about how working with RP impacted the way that you think about community and community building.

Erin Baker-Meno: When I first started doing this work, I honestly did not think critically about community building and the impact that it has on relationships. Our ancestors have been doing this work, but it isn't necessarily something that I see every day, and in the higher education work context, it isn't seen at all. We can't support each other effectively if we don't build community, have strong relationships, and have the ability to be vulnerable within that community. You must have a stake in your community. That can't happen without genuine community building. Before learning about RP, I didn't think about it. I know that is my colonized mind versus my liberation mind. But RP is a beautiful reminder that most things don't matter if we don't build community.

Ravi Bhatt: Erin, I appreciate you bringing in the idea of vulnerability because I agree that community building takes vulnerability, and I think restorative practices provide that space. Being vocal and vulnerable with a larger community was challenging when I started this work because I was socialized to only include immediate family in situations where things went wrong. However, in residential life, RP provides a lot of space to be authentically who you are while being accountable to the community, and that is empowering. Even as a resident assistant, restorative practices helped me think about positionality and power. I remember learning that while I have the positionality to be the most vocal on the floor, it was better for me to build a community where all voices could be heard and use circles to provide equitable space amongst the community. At the same time, the Ravi piece of it, the individual piece of it, was a little bit more challenging, because I had to recognize that I needed to be vulnerable and be held accountable too, as a part of the community.

Kelli Perkins: Erin and Ravi's responses have me thinking. I share elements of Ravi's childhood experience, but that approach never worked for me. The proactive piece has been the most impactful, and I think that's particularly true being in a position now where I have a higher level of power. It has helped me make some waves in a way that I don't think I could have otherwise in my fat Black woman body because I'm the only administrator of color. Using RP co-creatively has made the process of creating change easier because students are more able to embrace change in residential communities when they feel like their voices are considered.

Jeff Godowski: I appreciate what has been shared because it also has my brain going in a million directions. I talked with someone who utilizes RP outside of higher education, and they told me that RP can never work in residential life because all we do is police people. Higher education can be a place where the bar for control is extremely high, and it may seem that we're not actually interested in supporting people. I'm lucky that in my current role we can treat students more holistically. Restorative practices have shifted how students think of those of us who support them within a system that is based on surveillance and control. I appreciated what Kelli shared about making changes within her community because that change-oriented mindset is important.

Facilitator: How do you see restorative practices in conversation with liberatory practices?

Perkins: I think hierarchy gets in the way of RP. Higher education is so bureaucratic, and even when we implemented RP as a department, it was hard to make meaningful change when it wasn't done across the division or the institution. Part of challenging power is challenging, as Erin said, the colonized mind. RP and community building take time, which is something we don't have a lot of. I could be the most well-intentioned leader, but if I am not making time for my learning and embodiment of the philosophy, if we are utilizing RP and not also decolonizing, we are missing the mark. We need to break down systems and utilize different ways of thinking. We can't implement restorative practices in this current system and not also be doing deep equity and justice work.

Bhatt: I think that restorative practices work well with certain pieces of liberatory practices and not well with other pieces. If we are seeing RP used by and for only those with dominant identities, we are not utilizing liberatory practices. The truth is that we are trying to support those with minoritized identities in an oppressive and racist system. Community building is part of the definition of RP, but we need to ask who we are building that community for and who has the power to build that community. I don't feel that restorative practices can be liberatory unless we identify and dismantle the power that's coming into play. Once we start doing that, we take a step closer to liberatory practices.

Baker-Meno: Kelli, I loved your idea that in order to utilize restorative practices you have to do the social justice and liberation work, but the truth is that people don't. To work towards liberation you have to center the most marginalized within a community. And that's centering Blackness and centering Indigenous folk. People want to lump folks together. But my BIPOC-ness is not the same as your BIPOC-ness. We have to center that reality, and I don't think that mainstream RP is ready for that truth. I also think,

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Ravi, you're right that restorative practices can only take you so far toward dismantling larger oppressive systems without full institutional support. And institutions aren't willing to go there; they just keep the status quo.

Godowski: I feel like this is where the conversation about co-optation is important. I really appreciate, Ravi, that you broke it down. It helped me think of RP as something that could fully be a liberatory practice. But I have seen it abused or co-opted to center the power of the majority because facilitators pick and choose the parts that work for them or are easy. Maybe RP in the truest definition of what it could be can fully align with liberatory practices. I just don't think we're there yet.

Perkins: For me, what Jeff and Erin shared is exactly where RP gets stalled. I sit at my administrative team meetings, and I'm still the only person advocating for fair process. And with liberatory practices, we have to embrace flexibility and adaptivity in our approach because we know that Whiteness is not going to concede power willingly. I think that is very difficult in residential contexts when the majority of college and university communities are White. That's something I'm thinking a lot about: How do I implement restorative practices in a liberatory way in overwhelmingly White spaces? I don't know if that can happen, but I'm hopeful.

Bhatt: As a current graduate student at an overwhelmingly White institution, I can see that RP is seen as threatening because intentionally involving people of color in the circle is seen as a threat to dismantling Whiteness. It also matters if RP is being implemented as a top-down approach. As a student facilitator, I had the responsibility to facilitate RP in an equitable way, and that was a lot of pressure. Also, our voices weren't always included in the circle because we were responsible for facilitating the process. Erin, you said that restorative practices aren't there yet, and I agree; it's not going to be there until we critically consider identity and power.

Baker-Meno: Let me contradict myself a little bit. Liberation is an action; it's something that we're going to keep on working toward. Of course, if people in power don't subscribe to the work then it is challenging to do it, but it also isn't liberatory work if we're waiting for people in power to make the change for us. So where does it need to come from? I think about the work that Kelli's doing. Kelli, you know that your administration is against change, but you are continuing to do the work and hopefully there'll be some movement. But we shouldn't just be waiting for it.

Godowski: Adding onto that, there is a back and forth between the power that comes from the grassroots nature of the work (people coming together trying to make change within their immediate circle of control) versus this dream of whole-school implementation that we see in K-12 spaces. At my institution, we have built a lot of power through connection with an RP professional learning group for leaders across campus. But, as Ravi said, showing up requires vulnerability, particularly from the folks of color who join that space. For all of us, higher education is the workplace, but for some of us, that's also tied to our housing and our sustainability of life. It's hard to ask ourselves or others to be fully vulnerable creating change when the institution has control over your housing.

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Perkins: Right, Jeff. To be vulnerable means to share of yourself, to share things that people could actually wound you with. What Jeff said just hit me in the chest. How does taking risks for this work line up when you're a student or staff member depending on this school or job for your home?

Baker-Meno: I'm thinking about how it is hard to speak up. What I see most of the time is that BIPOC folk, usually Black women, always speak up. And White people don't speak up. Yet if we're looking at history and context, we know who gets fired or takes the hit first. If White people don't do this work, even though there is fear, how far do you think RP can go toward liberation?

Bhatt: Erin, I'm really glad you brought up the question of who is doing this work and who is getting fired. Because I think there can be repercussions even if you do the work well. I'll never forget that when I got promoted as an undergraduate student and my supervisor said that I did restorative practices well, one of my White colleagues told me, "Okay, you can stop showing off now." That stuck with me because I was just doing my job. The whole process is different for a Brown man, different for Black people, Black women, who have to do twice as much to get half as far. If we're trying to implement RP in residential life in a liberatory way, it has to work on dismantling systems. Erin, I also really appreciate what you said about not waiting for leadership to do the liberatory work because that is actually the whole point of restorative practices. It just also can be hard and exhausting to do that, especially as a person with minoritized identities.

Facilitator: Having witnessed some of the challenges but also the small advances RP has supported, what should practitioners focus on next?

Perkins: You can't talk about building relationships without doing some intentional work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space to help folks understand power and privilege. RP is about who you are and how you show up, not just what you do. We cannot talk about building relationships with people without talking about how identity plays into how we all have to show up and the personal work we have to do.

Bhatt: One population that's forgotten in restorative practices is students. Students play a role in creating a restorative campus as much as we do. If we want to reduce power hierarchy in a restorative way and create real change, students have to be in the conversation.

Godowski: Yes, Ravi. I struggle with feeling like we're still employing restorative practices "to" or "for" students, like "you need a circle, we're gonna do that for you." But we as administrators retain control of what's supposed to be happening in the space. I've always wanted to dig more deeply into what real co-creation with students might look like. What possibilities are we missing right now, and where could we go further if we included students in a lot of these conversations?

Baker-Meno: I remember that when I first learned about restorative practices I was taught that you do not need to talk about social identities because RP transcends everything: race, gender, and power. I learned that diversity training and restorative practices training are completely different. So a lot of times, the alignment gets brushed under the rug. I think that if we could find an alignment between the two, then restorative practices could significantly contribute as a liberatory practice.

DISCUSSION

While restorative practices can support and advance liberatory principles, they do not exist independently from our social context, including the individuals, groups, and systems that seek to reinforce the status quo. The co-authors' experiences reinforced research that criticizes the whitewashing and institutionalization of restorative practices (Blagg, 2017; Valandra, Wap̓háha Hokšíla, 2020). Like many aspirationally transformative strategies, restorative practices can be co-opted to perpetuate the status quo of institutions built upon White supremacist, colonizing, neoliberal systems (Lang, 2020; Schiff, 2018; Vaandering, 2010). While acknowledging these challenges, the co-authors of this article remained hopeful that restorative practices can contribute to liberatory aims in residential life.

Being, Not Doing

The co-authors regularly returned to the idea that restorative practices should be about self-reflection and doing the self-work to embody the values and principles associated with these practices. This intersects with the need for personal learning and work around diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. The co-authors advocated for practitioners to explicitly model and embody restorative principles while reflecting on their own identities and positionality within systems of power in their organizations (Davis, 2019; Fine, 2018).

Within residential life contexts, this requires intentional reflection and self-learning, particularly about identity, power, and privilege. Restorative concepts such as balancing high accountability and high support and utilizing a trauma-informed lens serve as tools for reflection. Doing deep intrapersonal and relational work requires time and effort, and in times of staff shortages and overworked staff, building in the time to reflect, learn, and act can be a challenge. To align with a more liberatory view of restorative practices, practitioners in residential life must commit to creating space for this intentional learning and growth for staff and students at all levels, both in training programs and in their work.

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Beyond Harm

To contribute to positive change, practitioners should lean into the potential of restorative practices to serve as a framework to build more equitable and just communities. This recommendation aligns with research from K-12 environments and other communities suggesting that a whole-school or holistic approach to restorative practices is more effective (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005; Morrison, 2007; Morrison et al., 2005).

In residential life contexts, this means using a restorative framework to build and maintain communities, not just for responding to harm within communities or student conduct processes. To manage instances of harm in a restorative way, community members must feel responsible for and committed to their communities, respect other community members, and be inclined to listen to the needs of others. Proactive restorative approaches, values, and fair processes can be used to build communities that are more trusting and psychologically safe (Mrowka, 2022). Conversations about liberation, justice, and equity within this type of community may be more likely to thrive. Within residential contexts, this can include proactive circle conversations, the use of affective statements and questions, and committing to more restorative or inclusive decision-making processes within units and departments.

Critical Co-Creation

The circle co-authors recommended that restorative principles must go beyond the simple inclusion of voices by highlighting and centering those who have been excluded in the conversation at all levels, including historically marginalized and student voices. Research on the implementation of restorative practices for students in elementary, middle schools, and high schools has consistently advocated for the integration of students as facilitators and critical stakeholders within their communities (Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014). Additionally, both circle co-authors and researchers are critical of the intersection of Whiteness and restorative practices. They challenge White practitioners to consider ways to de-center themselves in the work and reduce racial harm (Davis, 2019; Wadhwa, 2020).

Within a residential life context, this conversation can challenge practitioners to think critically about the engagement of students and student leaders in decision-making and culture-building at their institutions. Restorative practices call for a re-thinking of the co-creation and distribution of power amongst all members of our institutional and residential communities. Additionally, a more liberatory view of restorative practices requires a critical perspective on including all identities in structures and spaces. Within residence halls, this includes creating processes and procedures that allow for student input and feedback on the maintenance of their communities.

Systemic Lens

The co-authors were clear that restorative practices can advance liberatory goals but are “not there yet.” Practitioners must be intentional about utilizing the full potential of restorative practices by considering a system-level focus and working to dismantle systems of oppression. The co-authors argued that both bottom-up and top-down approaches might be required for these practices to contribute to meaningful change.

In a residential life context, this means that a restorative framework might be incorporated into multiple institutional levels using various implementation strategies if it is to contribute to liberation. Anderson (2020) advocates for an ethos-building approach within higher education that requires shifting organizational culture and making changes within policies and processes. Implementing this more transformative, systems-level view of restorative practices at multiple levels within a department or institution can contribute to goals of liberation on campus. Doing so requires a commitment to restorative principles and processes beyond the simple implementation of conversation circles or alternative sanctions to conduct violations.

CONCLUSION

This conversation advanced a narrative inquiry to investigate the liberatory potential of restorative practices in residential life. By engaging a diverse set of residence life professionals in conversation, the authors sought to provide an opportunity to learn from the collective wisdom of the circle. In a residential life context, RP work is not liberatory by default. However, restorative practices can contribute to liberation when implemented explicitly, with intention, and with an eye towards transformative and systems-level change. These practices, therefore, may be a helpful framework when used in conversation and collaboration with other liberatory frameworks and approaches. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do restorative practices, rooted in Indigenous justice paradigms, challenge the dominant Western approaches to conflict resolution and community building in higher education? Discuss the balance between the theoretical underpinnings of restorative practices and their practical applications within residential life and higher education settings.
2. How have restorative practices contributed to creating stronger, more inclusive communities within higher education? Reflect on the proactive and responsive elements of these practices and on their role in fostering civic commitment among students and staff.
3. How do restorative practices intersect with liberatory practices and efforts to address systemic inequalities within higher education? Discuss the potential and limitations of restorative practices in challenging power dynamics, centering marginalized voices, and promoting social justice.
4. Reflect on using a restorative circle as a methodology for the study. How does this approach facilitate a co-creative dialogue among participants, and what insights does it offer into the liberatory potential of restorative practices in residential life?
5. What are the main challenges in implementing restorative practices within higher education institutions' hierarchical and bureaucratic structure? Discuss strategies for confronting these challenges and the role of leadership in fostering a restorative culture.
6. Considering how restorative practices have often been co-opted or diluted within institutional settings, what steps can practitioners take to ensure that these practices contribute meaningfully to liberation and equity? How can these practices be aligned more closely with diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice efforts within higher education?

Discussion questions prepared by Richard Manu, Clemson University